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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

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14 March 1980

MEMORANDUM

Muslim Reactions to a US Blockade of Iran

Conclusion

A US blockade of Iran would stimulate a largely hostile reaction from Muslim states, impact negatively on US attempts to improve its access to military facilities in the region, further strain US relations with Saudi Arabia, and probably provoke anti-American demonstrations, especially in states with large Shia populations.

Basic Attitudes

From the beginning of the Iran-US confrontation Islamic countries have reacted ambivalently. Some local perceptions build support for the United States:

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the

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Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated within OPA and with the National Intelligence Officer for Near East South Asia. Questions and comments may be addressed to Chief, Near East South Asia Division, [redacted]

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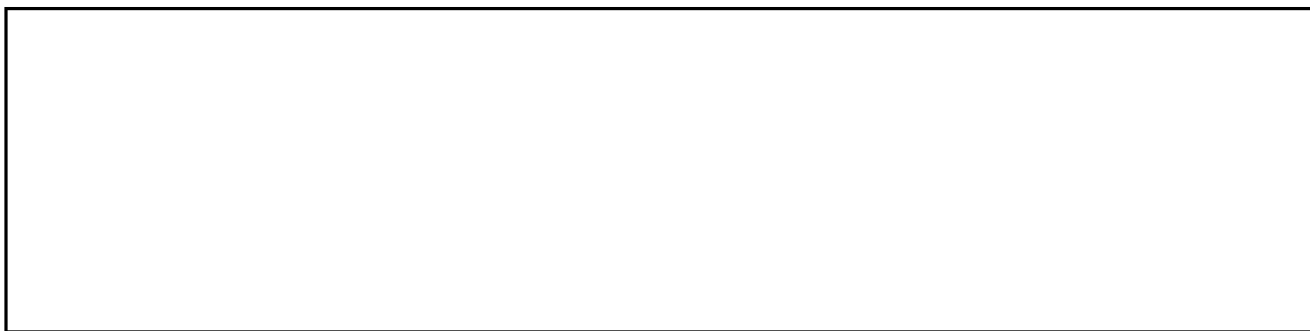
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The negative factors clearly are now predominant in the Arab Muslim world, and there would be overwhelming opposition to a US blockade of Iran. Within any given country, the intensity of opposition would grow as one moves from the official level to the popular level. Among the various countries, intensity will generally increase with geographic proximity to the Gulf.

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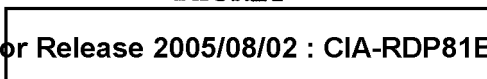


The positive factors listed probably still constitute a base for acceptance by most moderate Islamic countries of a quick, successful military operation that rescued the hostages and avoided significant civilian casualties. If presented with such a fait accompli, most of the area's leaders would breathe a sigh of relief and probably issue only perfunctory condemnation. A blockade, however, has few of these advantages. To be effective it would have to be applied over a long period of time, and we judge that any existing sympathy for the US position would steadily erode as time passed.

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Reactions Among Moderate Gulf States

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 Those who criticized the freezing of Iranian assets last fall as a dangerous precedent would see a blockade in the same light.

Oil producers would expect a blockade to provoke new demands from Arab radicals--including such important producers as Libya and perhaps Algeria--to use oil as a political weapon. The Gulf producers would probably successfully resist such pressures, but the general uncertainty of the situation would in any case probably result in a temporary drop or even an interruption in oil exports from the Gulf. Some Gulf producers might exploit the situation to justify cutbacks that they in fact want to make for political and economic reasons.

There is the additional danger that Arab radicals could sink an oil tanker in the Gulf. The US would be blamed for

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having created a war-like environment and the impact on our West European allies and on the international oil community would be considerable. The likely result would be to reduce support for US policy in the region.

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Many Arabs would also view the action as election year showmanship intended more to influence the American electorate than to resolve the hostage situation.

A blockade would adversely affect the US drive to acquire use of military facilities in the region. [REDACTED]

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This sentiment is likely to boost Iraq's chances for obtaining a strong consensus in support of its Arab charter proposal, which aims at exclusion of all foreign bases in the region.

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Iraq

Although Baghdad has its own serious problems with Iran, the Iraqis would view a US blockade as another dangerous step in superpower meddling in the Persian Gulf. They see such activity as undermining the sovereignty of individual area states and standing in the way of Iraqi ambitions to succeed Iran as the principal power in Gulf affairs. A US blockade would conflict with Iraq's strong view that its security depends on protecting free passage through Gulf waters, Iraq's only sea outlet.

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Non-Gulf Arabs

The Maghreb. Except in Libya, there is sympathy among

Although a strong supporter of Iran's revolution, the

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 The Algerians, however, have warned the US against employing military force or economic sanctions; they fear Washington will use the hostage issue as a pretext to meddle in regional affairs.

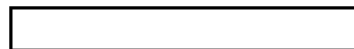
Libya has strongly supported the Iranian position on the hostage crisis. Tripoli apparently has hoped from the beginning that it would prod other Arab states into joining Libya in anti-US sanctions, and the Qadhafi regime almost certainly would seize on a blockade action by the US to

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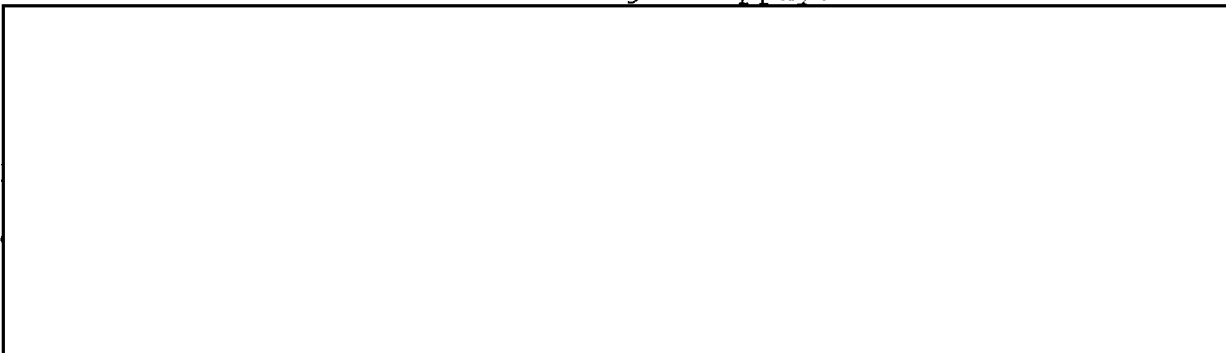
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Together,

Libya and Algeria furnish about 20 percent of total US oil imports; and some cities on the East coast depend on Algeria for 20 percent of their natural gas supply.

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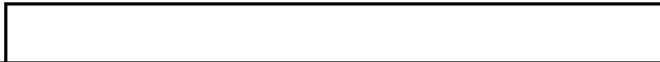
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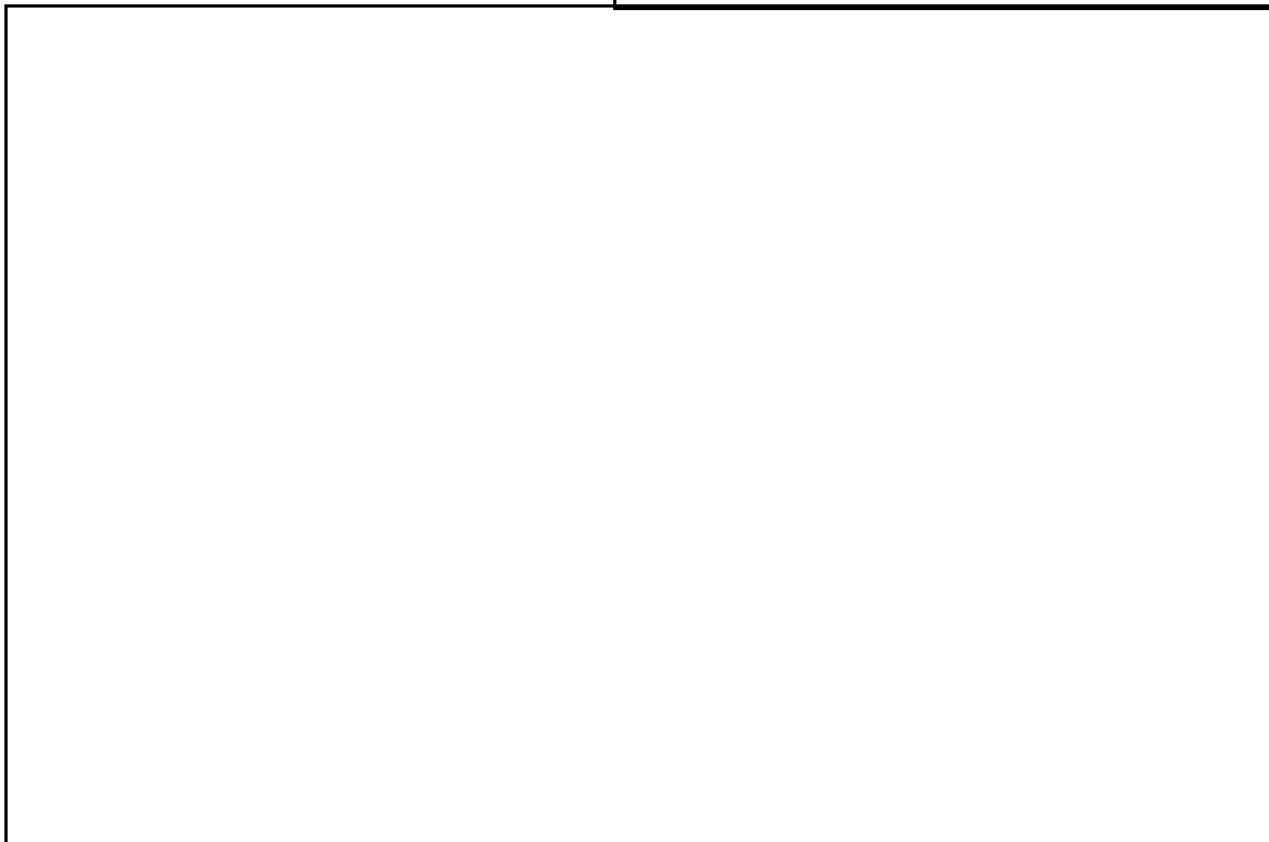
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would probably keep a low profile and avoid directly condemning the US, neither would be in a position to offer direct support to Washington.



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Other Muslims

A blockade could stimulate anti-US actions elsewhere in the Muslim world.

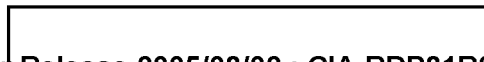
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violence probably would be contained but the affected governments would be pushed toward opposing US action in Iran more strongly.

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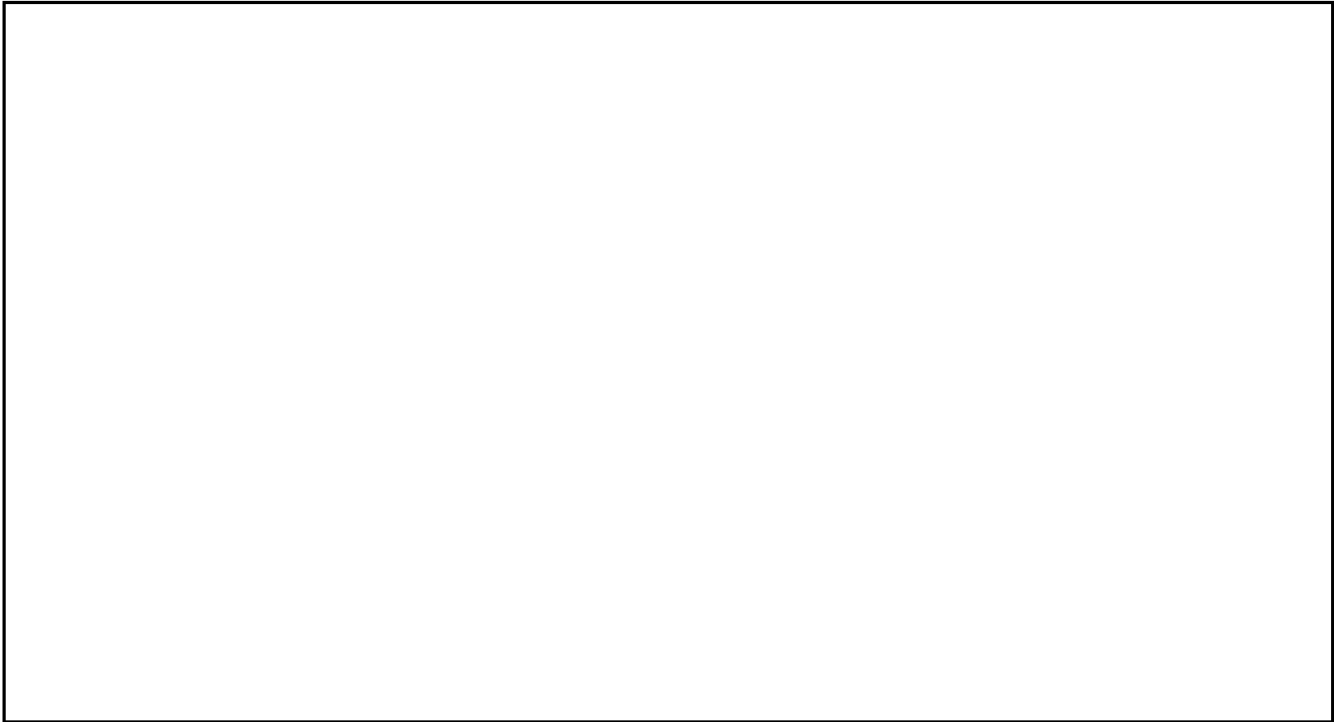


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of the hostages but would not consider their continued retention justification for a blockade. She fears a US-USSR confrontation in the region, but will be more openly critical of US moves and apologetic for Soviet ones.

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Iranian Reactions

Initially a US blockade of Iranian ports would probably tend to unite Iranians behind the government and Ayatollah Khomeini. Even in the Iranian military, where there is considerable unhappiness with the regime, we would expect an outpouring of patriotic sentiment. Over time, however, significant differences of view are likely to come forward:

--Western oriented Iranians, middle class professionals, military officers and some moderate secular politicians and religious leaders like Ayatollah Shariat-Madari-- would fear that a blockade meant the end of any significant relationship with the West. These groups have little influence over the hostage crisis.

--The militants at the US Embassy would point to the blockade as evidence of the anti-Iranian character of "world devouring" Americans and use a blockade to justify continued holding of the hostages and the rejection of compromise.

--Leftist groups like the Tudeh Party would urge closer cooperation with the Soviet bloc to defend Iran against the US.

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President Bani-Sadr would be placed in a difficult position. He would probably continue to try to find some way to end the hostage crisis, but his ability to maneuver would be sharply constrained. Any move toward compromise would open him to charges of selling the country out under pressure.

The most crucial figure would continue to be Ayatollah Khomeini. A blockade might encourage Khomeini to increase rhetorical calls for martyrdom. He is not easily pressured by force and unless he concluded that the blockade was leading to the destruction of the Islamic Republic; he would not yield.



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25X6 equipment, such as mine sweepers, but we doubt that Soviet personnel would become directly involved in its operation. [redacted]

The Soviets would almost certainly offer to help ease Iran's import problems. They would hope their assistance would help repair relations with the Khomeini regime and establish a positive record with whatever forces eventually dominate in Tehran. In view of the troubled state of the Soviet economy, however, sizeable amounts of assistance, particularly if they had to be sustained over a long period of time would be painful to Moscow. [redacted]

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The Soviets can be expected to energetically exploit US anti-Iranian operations to try to bolster Soviet ties to Iran. [redacted]

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[redacted] If the US did not significantly escalate its military pressure on Iran,

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the Soviets would probably claim that their diplomatic protests and military warnings had deterred the US.

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